
The Runaways

THE sky rolled from side to side like an animal in pain, outstretched on the soft, saturated trees. Now and again there was a groan of thunder, and lightning played with a glitter of enormous eyes rolling in their sockets.

The lamp in the cross-roads saloon hollowed out a space in the darkness into which the rain poured, in which it was as bright as tin. Charlie Fox knelt there in the mud and admired this brightness. Then, dreamily, he set out toward home—to be more exact, toward the pleasant sour fragrance of the vegetation half-floating, half-rooted, in the fields. He could not endure bad weather unless he was drunk, when it meant nothing to him. He lay in the mud, lurched into cold creeks, stumbled through the under-

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brush at the side of the road, blustered and hiccoughed, collapsed backwards into a ditch or the flooded grass. His obstinate sighs mixed with the wind as it pulled the clouds away. He always got home safely at last. His daughter Amelia left a lamp rolled low in a window to guide him to his bed, but he usually tumbled quietly into the haymow.

The eighty-acre farm which he had inherited was a miserable thing to be dependent upon. Gashed with gullies, the fields of red clay sloped acutely toward the house and barn, which were half hidden in the edge of a swamp. In the center of this swamp, like an immense ditch, lay a lake into which the rains kept carrying the top-soil. Charlie Fox's father, understanding the farm's weaknesses, had kept the upper acres in sod-crops, filled the gullies with stone, planted clover to nourish the soil, rotted the straw in the barnyard and hauled it with manure into all the fields in turn. In his youth Charlie had learned these hard lessons, but preferred to

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forget them. He planted only a little oats for the horse, a little corn for the cattle. The fences tottered and fell under the loads of woodbine and wild grapes. In large pastures full of thistles two or three sharp-hipped cows gnawed the June-grass that grew between the stones.

Charlie hired out by the day to his neighbors. They liked him, remembering his good nature whenever his bad habit made him a nuisance. One autumn, for example, having wandered away too frequently to a bottle behind a beam in the wagon-shed, he had dropped his pitchfork into a threshing machine, spoiling the blades which cut the twine; the owner had cursed and threatened, but in the end Charlie was not even obliged to pay for the damage. He was satisfied with this way of life—moving irresponsibly from farm to farm, working in no hurry, spending his earnings on drink when the weather was bad, his spare time mooning about the countryside. The roads were

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white, and pointed into distant hollows and distant forests, or lifted up to pierce the sky: arrows pointing to the sickly solitude that he loved . . .

His wife and daughter lived like a pair of domestic animals in a pen: coarse trees on three sides, one of Charlie's roads on the other, no variety, no entertainment, no plans, nothing to expect but that poverty would pinch them more and more cruelly; and they were bound to this man who was happy in a mysterious way, and so did not care.

As a tall wry-faced girl, Mrs. Fox, having been assured by her brothers that she need not expect to be courted for her looks, had married Charlie to avoid becoming an old maid. Charlie's mother had suggested that he might wake up and get his feet on the ground when he married; his bride had taken the chance and lost.

"Everything's goin' to pieces," she complained. "It's the worst-lookin' place in the county. Look at that broke rig with the

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weeds growin' through the wheels. The tools all out gettin' rusted. I'll be switched if even the mare don't look mangy!"

"Oh, stop it, Ma!" Amelia grumbled. "What good does that kind'a talk do?"

"Nobody goes by on the road," her mother went on, "nothin' to see, nothin' to do. And me sick. Your pa gets the best of it, he gets out among folks. We women don't get no further'n you could throw a stone."

Amelia marched across from the sink, her round shoulders raised, shaking her dish-towel angrily. "Who's to blame for this God-awful marsh? What's the use'a so much whimpering? Who's to blame, I ast you? Better lie down, Ma, and rest."

As soon as the girl went out to do the milking the sick woman shuffled away to bed. If it rained she tossed back and forth among the quilts and pillows, kept awake by the water which streamed in all the gullies, washing the best of their land down to the lake, temporary rivers with an echo in the universe,

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gurgling and growing thick, without foam. Soon there would be nothing left but rocks like a lot of skulls between the fences.

Amelia was a short, displeasing, muscular girl. Her chapped skin seemed to have been drawn tight over the bones of her face—over the long nose, the not quite symmetrical cheek-bones, the stubborn receding chin—drawn tight and fastened in back by her knotted hair. When she did not pout, her lips were scarcely to be seen.

She did all the chores as well as the house-work: gave the cattle frozen corn-fodder to supplement the straw which they ate from the stack, milked them and took the can to the cheese factory, pumped from the stinking vat her share of whey for the pigs. Down trenches which she had shovelled in the snow-drifts she staggered with slopping pails of swill, her long arms almost pulled from their sockets. At butchering time she worked elbow to elbow with the men, scraping the bristles from the carcasses soused in boiling

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water; and she alone cut up the pork, rubbed and smoked the bacon, ground the sausage meat and stuffed the intestines with it. On spring nights she watched for hours over the old sows while they farrowed, lest they eat their young. Her last duty was to turn down the lamp in the window which her father could see as he stumbled up the road.

The lake in the swamp contained black bass and pickerel. It belonged to a paralytic widow in Milwaukee; so Charlie posed as its proprietor and rented his flat-bottomed boat to fishermen two or three times a week, which seemed to him an ideal source of revenue. One Sunday morning a young man named Nick Richter drove up before the barn with two bamboo poles wagging behind his buggy, and Amelia showed him where to tie his horse and brought the heavy oars from the shed.

He soon became Amelia's suitor. His father had been a blacksmith; just before he died, having speculated in Texas oil, he had

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been forced to sell his house, his shop, and every hammer and horseshoe in it. Nick had no home, but worked here and there, chiefly in the towns, at odd jobs. He bought a horse and buggy when he could afford to, and sold them when he was out of work; and at every Saturday and Sunday night dance for years tried to make a good marriage. But he danced with his jaw, his neck, and his elbows; the boisterous girls merely laughed at him. These entertainments were also expensive; he grew discouraged. Having found Amelia, he had only to take her to the lake to fish or pretend to fish, and could save a little money.

A fragrant old road led down through the swamp. Near the lake the water glimmered between the boughs in mother-of-pearl strips. Over it and over the treetops murky hills lifted their feeble, capricious beauty. A muddy channel led from the tottering boathouse out through the reeds to a cup-shaped harbor, separated from the deep water

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by a sand bar. In this quiet place a few lilies grew, the yellow variety thrusting above the surface its hard serpent heads, the white spreading out tufts of morbid plumage. Here the boat was at rest, the oars hanging from the oarlocks. Along the shore autumn leaves, dead bodies of leaves, shadows of leaves, fell and floated among the water-lilies. Nick crouched in the bottom of the boat, half-hidden, and Amelia, sitting on the broad back seat, held his head on her lap in her hands. There was a wan, stupid look of ecstasy on her face, an ecstasy of possession without confidence that she could keep him, without hope that she would be any better off if she did.

One morning that fall when an odor, iced and musky, came out of the forest and the dewy red leaves looked swollen, the thickets very large with mist, Amelia went into the barn soon after daybreak. Light came in, a feeble quivering of it, from the two peep-holes and innumerable cracks. The loud

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sparrows were up and about. Amelia first saw a pair of heavy boots, smeared with dry mud, the toes turned sharply outward, and beyond them and between them Charlie's face, tough, snow-white, and disdainful, hay in his hair and several stalks in his mustache. She shook him and found that he was dead.

Then Amelia was sort of heiress; the man who married her would have a farm of his own. Nick married her at once.

Her dying mother expressed gratification, rather peevishly. "Amelia couldn't stand it, bein' alone. I ain't much company no more." She grew steadily weaker, and kept the young bride at her bedside all that winter, reproachful and insistent with her eyes when she could not speak. They buried her in April.

"Of course I'll miss her, and she was always good to me," Amelia kept saying at the funeral, as if to come up to someone's expectations, hiding her eyes in a clean handkerchief.

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Someone asked, "Are you and Nick going to stay on the farm?"

"I don't know."

"I thought you might try something else. The land isn't much good, is it?"

"Good for nothin'," she said. "Nick's plumb disgusted. He says I ought to've told him. But I was sweet on him. Oh Lord! that land's wore out, sandy—stone and ditches. It's gettin' now so's it won't raise grass—never was manured any. And the fences are all down. God! I hate it!"

"Well, not just because it's poor farmin'. I don't know—the woods maybe, those rotten trees so close. It's no way to live; you see 'em all day and hear 'em all night. When I was a kid I used to be scared our house would slide into the lake. Was you ever down there? It just shows you what it's always been like. If you fell in, you'd have some chance. But if you was always in. . ."

Her voice became a wild whisper. "You need some excitement. I never went no-

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where, never saw nothin'—had to work. I guess you wouldn't have the nerve to get out of a dead hole like that if you knew you got to come back. That's why I never went to dances. I guess you'd jump into the lake for good—when you got home, I mean."

"Why don't you sell the whole outfit and rent a house near town?" someone asked. "Nick could make as much in town by the day as he does here."

She did not seem to be listening. "And it's so awful still," she muttered. "My God! It's so still you can hear the slime dripping in the well."

"Sell it and go to town. Nick could make two or three dollars a day. Don't try to stick it out another year. Give yourself a chance. Have an auction."

"What?" she cried. "Sell that junk? Lord, it wouldn't bring thirty cents. Spread all that rubbish round the yard for a lot of old women to pick over? I should say not. Oh, I couldn't," she lamented. "I couldn't

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go off and leave the house, everything the way it's always been. It'd be like leaving one'a them, Ma or Pa—like not burying them," she said.

That spring Nick put in only the patch of oats for the horse, ploughed up the garden for Amelia, and began to hire out to his neighbors as Charlie had done. He was a good worker in his sour, muttering way, but he was not popular. Holding out his red wrists stiffly was all that he ever did to show willingness. He was bad-tempered, and growing worse every day. Perhaps his marriage was a disappointment; without doubt, in so far as he had been able to imagine such things, he must have missed the serenity of a married man, the security of a man of property. How could he have helped being contaminated by Amelia's reckless discontent? Perhaps he was afraid of her: a weak swimmer who had ventured into what looked like a stagnant pool, to find himself in the

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embrace of a profound, indomitable current . . .

By autumn she had brought him around to her point of view—less a point of view than a mania, a waking dream. She would stand a long time under the poplars full of blackbirds, glaring at the exhausted soil gaping through the grass, the thin stand of grain, the capacious parched gullies, the trees asleep in the sunshine. Then she would shout raucously and chase the hens around the yard with a stick. Every day she killed one and they ate it, until they were all gone.

“There ain’t no sale for such a place,” Nick told her. “Your pa had it insured for more’n it was worth—he didn’t know no better.”

In consequence, she got out the insurance policy and pored over it by the hour; it was hard for her to read; but there at the head of the page it said five thousand dollars—that was hers, the company had no right to keep it, she would have it.

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One morning they packed a small tin trunk, put it under the buggy seat, and covered it with a horse-blanket. They had sold the cattle, but they had to leave the hogs behind. Nick had brought home a bottle in honor of the occasion, and took a drink to give him courage. Then they made a pile of newspapers and bed-quilts in the cellar, lit it, and drove away as fast as they could toward Belleville, taking indirect wooded roads lest they be turned back by someone who had heard the news.

In the semicircle of swampy forest the little house squatted, stared from its uncurtained windows which resembled idiot eyes without eyelashes. The sheds leaned against the barn. A sick dove staggered over the rocks by the water-trough. A little way from the kitchen door some shirts, stockings, and torn dish-towels hung on a line stretched between two posts; Amelia had said, smiling from ear to ear, "Leave them things there, so's the neighbors won't think any harm."

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Indoors the breakfast dishes lay in and around a dishpan of cold water, and the fire in the range was only a handful of pink coals; but one could have smelled smoke, and finally it began to curl up through the cracks in the floor.

Down the road a fat man named Beacon sat on his lawn, a pitcher of water beside him, fanning his wet face with a newspaper. In hot weather, on account of his weight, he had to leave the hard work to his sons. He beckoned to a passer-by and went down, wheezing and ponderous, to the road. "Hey, as you went by Fox's," he asked, "did you see anything of Nick?"

He was deaf, so his neighbor shouted. "Nobody there. I wanted to get him myself, so I stopped by their house."

"Whew!" the heavy man sighed. "Nobody there. Queer. Nick's been helpin' us out, and he hain't showed up today. He al'ays sends word. I thought he must'a been sick."

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"Now that is funny. Amelia wasn't there, neither."

"Well, it's a new wrinkle for Nick," Beacon concluded mournfully.

At the Hope's Corner store someone noticed a faint smokiness in the air. Someone else said, "It comes down from the forest fires in the north of the state."

A vast black mushroom rose over the swamp. When the wind broke it up, the smoke, thick and steady and the color of wheat chaff, rolled slowly overhead.

Through a hole in the roof a great draught lifted the flame as if in a chimney. The yard filled with men, their faces in the ruddy light spectral and glistening. They fought the fire eagerly and with some skill. They chopped down the flaming porch. Sweat dripped under their blue shirts. Three of them in turn working the handle of the coughing, spurting pump, and bucket after bucket of water was passed from hand to hand and emptied.

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A good many buggies, wagons, and autos drew up along the road; several women looked on with interest, their summer dresses and parasols lending to the catastrophe an air of picnic. Among the spectators but near enough to make his advice heard above the crackle and roar of the fire, the other shouts, the axes, the creak of the pump-handle, old Beacon was enthroned on a dry-goods box. "Well," he demanded, between orders, "what d'you think of this? They had it insured." He winked. "Well, I'll be damned, anyhow." He swelled out his cheeks and blew wearily.

The roof fell, splitting like paper, and after that the fire diminished. The floor sent up smoke and steam, but no more flame. The kitchen stove crashed through the charred boards into the cellar.

"But I don't know what these men are burstin' themselves for, at a job like this," old Beacon said. "Looks to me like nobody's goin' to thank 'em for it. The mare and the

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cart're gone. An' everythin' else of any value, I'll bet."

The flames left a ruin shaped like a charred pot. The men drew off—wet, black, tired, and puzzled—washed their faces at the pump and rolled down their sleeves. The horses were untied, everyone piled into one vehicle or another, and they drove away shouting; but those who spoke of the cause of the fire did so in pairs, very quietly.

From the foul and broken house the smoke went up straight to the sky. Now it was soft as wool, now like a shell or a tower of shell. It widened over the swamp, casting a shadow on the lake, and persisted until dusk with an even melancholy trembling.

Meanwhile over the little wooded hills Nick and Amelia were in flight, though they did not realize it at first, having intended to drive back toward evening, to hide their trunk in a gully, and pretend to be heart-broken. Nick had brought his bottle along; he was not used to drinking, so he giggled

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like a small girl and amused himself by picking the brightest leaves from the trees as they passed. Amelia drove. Suddenly she began to whip the horse. "I'm not goin' to stop at Belleville," she said. "I'm going to Fond du Lac; it's a big place."

"We've got to go back home and put in the claim for the insurance, you blamed fool."

"I won't. I tell you I won't. I don't want to. We can get the money in Fond du Lac." She whimpered and looked over her shoulder.

"What's the matter with you, anyway? Are you afraid of the fire? Are you ashamed of yourself? You ought to be." He slapped her, but that did not prevent her from turning down a road which led toward the larger town.

"Oh, I don't know, I don't care. But I'm not goin' back home any more. Lord! I hate that place. And you're supposed to work for old Beacon; he'll be awful mad and he'll make out who started the fire." Her hair had come down; her face was weary and

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yellow; her mouth twitched as if she were angry. She went on whipping the old mare.

Then, thanks to the bottle, Nick decided that she was funny, and took everything in good nature. They had nothing to eat all day. Toward sunset they arrived in Fond du Lac. Nick had worked there and knew his way about; Amelia had the money from the sale of the cows in her stocking; they took a room in a boarding-house. That night Nick went to see a disreputable lawyer whom he knew, told him the story, and gave him the insurance policy.

The next day the lawyer went to Hope's Corner. He found old Beacon on his lawn, wearing a wet bandana handkerchief instead of a hat. "I am an insurance lawyer. I want to make some inquiries about that fire."

"The less said about that the better," Beacon replied. "Whew!" He settled his damp cheeks in the folds of his neck. "A plain case of arson. But they cleared out and gave the whole show away. They ain't much

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better at lawbreakin' than anything else. Well, the old house is burned to the timbers. It serves poor old Charlie Fox right for insuring his farm for more'n it's worth. And for havin' a half-witted girl."

When the lawyer got back to town and told the fugitives that he would not take up their claim, Amelia cursed the insurance company and accused him of fraud; Nick burst into tears and said it was her fault and beat her. Then they went down to dinner at the boarding-house table.

The shuttered dining room smelled like a potato-cellar. When the landlady trotted out of the kitchen and set down platters of meat in slabs as large as her hand and bowls of bitter turnips in milk, the regular boarders looked with wan faces at their plates and at one another. Nick and Amelia had no appetites on account of their misfortune.

On their way into town they had passed two belated vans of a tent carnival, the horses' fetlocks stirring up dust in clouds which

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settled on the faces of several men with cheeks full of tobacco and a hatchet-faced woman who lay on some rolls of canvas. There were two ladies from this company at the boarding-house. These two ate with the silent heartiness of women paid to do so in a show-window as an advertisement of something. Under mats of blondined hair fastened with rhinestone pins, their faces had an identical appearance of cheap china. Their hard eyes lay still amid soiled eyelashes; the spots of orange rouge were too close to their ears; their nails, cut in triangles, shone like celluloid. Grasping their knives and forks vigorously, their eyes unfocussed, their red mouths in motion, they consumed the fat meat to the last drop of gravy, the soggy pie to the last crumb.

Amelia gazed at these two with open-mouthed admiration; they were her ideal. After dinner they passed out handbills and she engaged one of them in conversation, telling how their house had burned down and a

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lawyer her husband had picked out had cheated them of their insurance. Meanwhile the other asked Nick to come upstairs to help her move a trunk. Nick came down red-faced and flattered; and all four of them made their way to the dance-hall park, between the river and the railroad tracks, where the carnival had pitched its tents.

Five great wagons and a mud-caked Ford were drawn up on the banks of an untidy stream. The horses grazed in an adjoining vacant lot, sweat dried in flakes on their backs, switching at the flies and never lifting their heads to look at the tumultuous camp, unfolded out of the loads they had drawn.

In the center, like a fat woman pirouetting, the merry-go-round revolved laboriously. The minute stallions with mincing legs outspread and foamless lips parted, the pair of crimson tigers drawing a chariot for those too timid or too large to go astride, and the sky-blue bears—the power which set them gradually rocking and circling came

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from a steam engine shaped like a short-necked bottle, whose whistle preceded the slapping and squeaking of the leather belts and the outburst of shrill tunes from the calliope when all the passengers, mostly children, had been hoisted and set upright in the saddles.

A crowd of untidy women and shouting boys filled the alley between the tents. The refreshment booth, a great umbrella of canvas over planks laid from barrel to barrel, did a brisk business in ice-cream cones, tepid drinks, sandwiches, and sausages. A young man whose hair hung down in shoestrings and a young woman with brown pouches beneath her eyes ran from side to side, calling, "What's yours?" and, "Don't push, please," storing the nickels and dimes in a cash-register drawer which opened and shut with a grating noise.

Next to it stood a Hit the Nigger Baby establishment: a hierarchy of dolls, a pile of baseballs with which to knock them down,

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and a display of bad cigars, vases, felt pillow-covers, and ash-trays, for prizes. Though it was Saturday afternoon, few grown men were there to patronize it; for those who had worked all morning in that heat naturally preferred to lie on couches indoors, alone, with newspapers over their faces.

Through the crowd, like two small children, Nick and Amelia followed the theatrical ladies, toward whom sometimes heads were turned and fingers pointed, because they were so rouged and fashionable. Who could have told which was the proudest then, the country wife or her sullen and fickle husband? They left their new friends at the entrance to the show, "Gay Paree," promising to go in when it began.

The leaves of the maples, pockmarked and bleached by a common blight, loosened and glided through the windless air; the calliope played, the barkers grew hoarse, many babies cried. The two who had run away from the country forgot their unsuccessful fraud,

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forgot the swamp, their hopelessness, the future, and wandered up and down, too happy to enjoy any particular thing. Already Nick was trying to seem accustomed to it all, hunching his shoulders as he always did, in the manner of a bad-tempered bird of prey. Amelia walked with a loose light-footedness, gazing in every direction at once, like one who has just come to paradise.

Finally they returned to the boarding-house with the shameless dancers. The result was that they joined the carnival company before it left Fond du Lac, contributing the horse and buggy and what was left from the sale of their two cows as capital. At first Nick drove a van and Amelia cooked sausages and patties of ground meat on a black pan in the refreshment pavilion, taking the place of the brown-cheeked woman, who had fallen ill.

For years they travelled about Wisconsin and up and down the Mississippi in this company. Business was not good; business was

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never good, or never good enough. It was a hard life: shouting, luring, brow-beating, laughing, and singing; eating the poorest food, counting the smallest coins, packing the tents, frayed finery, nigger dolls, fangless rattlesnakes, and petrified Belgian babies; the boss and his wife going ahead in the Ford to rent the next park, the rest following slowly after the strong-smelling horses. Nick and Amelia, as well as the youngest Gaiety Queen and the newest freak, learned that romance is for those who see, never for those who do, and underpaid as a profession.

Floating overhead there was a picture on slack canvas of the dope fiend, a moon-colored young man with scaly, allegorical beasts nestling against his ribs. Under it hung posters of Jocko, the Baboon Man, who spoke the monkey language and ate raw meat, a snake-charmer among her serpents, which stood up in spirals as thick as trees, and the Fat Woman, a belted and corsetted feather-bed, with oval fingers scarcely meeting across

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her chest. A nervous little man who looked as if he might at any moment burst into tears lectured the people. Inside, the pale young man murmured, "Cigarette smoking has made me what I am today," and the charmer crooned perfunctorily to her sick snakes; the tent reeked with his ether and her toilet water. When he was feeling well, Jocko, the Baboon Man, tore off the heads of squawking live hens with his teeth and sucked their blood.

There was always a crowd in front of the other tent, "Gay Paree," perhaps because of the free show before the performance. Three women and a negro came out on a platform like a large bench. The women's diaphanous slips, all beads and fringe, did not cover a row of pink and green legs, two of which were crooked and four fat. They gazed at the crowd with the solemnity of caged animals and with an air of concentration; it was not easy to look voluptuous on the couchless, cushionless boards. One of them pulled her

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blouse away from her body and peered avidly inside it. The negro who was standing sleepily beside them crouched at a given moment and began to pipe, drearily and loud, on a sort of flute. The women stiffened, their lips parted, the pupils of their eyes grew large and still. Three arms were lifted, and all their bodies throbbed, paused, throbbed again. Then each one curved her waist extremely, first to the right side, then to the left, and each seemed to spring upward and outward and relax like a bow from which an arrow has been shot. Three shrill cries and a tapping of the negro's foot marked the time.

During the dance Amelia came out of the tent behind the performers and sat down in the ticket booth. As she took out the roll of tickets like a pulley wheel and counted the change in a box, her small eyes drifted loftily from dull face to dull face: so many strangers, so many fools, so many tickets to be sold . . .

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She had grown fat and looked like a female jack-in-the-box. Her narrow lips had been pressed together gradually by rectangular cheeks; there were deep crevices at her wrists; the sharp chin-bone was lost amid a succession of double chins, gathered into a tight necklace of amber beads. Her hair was mounted in a pompadour over a visible brown rat. Her purple velvet dress had worn leathery at the elbows. Nevertheless, the way she sat in her booth like an improvised pulpit, the fruits of experience in her face, the new masses of her body, did make one think in some way of progress and prosperity and joy.

Nick's appearance between the flaps, coat-tails first, as he argued with someone inside the tent, silenced the music and arrested the dancing. He turned around and began to harangue the onlookers and to shake his large fists, straining the frock-coat which was buttoned too tightly across his chest. His glance was still hurt and ominous, and there was

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still the suggestion of a curse in the tone of his voice; the carnival had not been his salvation. Amelia alone, soothed by movement and noise, gorged with excitement, was satisfied; and without looking at him seemed to be making fun of his angry hands, the furtive hope in his eyes, the mastiff jaw that would never dare to snap.

"You have here, ladies and gentlemen," he continued, smiling conventionally, "the flower of Oriental art. It is no singing and dancing for children. There are things about it they would not appreciate. All these famous performers have appeared in Paris. The French do not relish tame entertainments. They like it hot and strong. You have seen their free preliminary dance. It is only a sample of what they can do. The admission is ten cents. I advise you strongly to come in. The show starts in five minutes."

The women and the negro sauntered down the steps behind the flap. Nick disappeared. Amelia began to tear off tickets and make

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change, and presently she followed. All was well; for in the dusty grove were tents, the brass throats of the calliope opened again, and the whole small town throbbed with music.